

June floods contributing to blue-green algae blooms on area lakes

By: Greg Matthews, South Central Region, submitted by Susan Sylvester

That odorous “pond scum” on many waterways in southern Wisconsin is a direct result of unprecedented flooding last month. The advent of warm weather and bright sunlight, combined with the nutrient-enriched floodwaters that emptied into lakes, ponds and slow-moving streams created conditions ideal for the growth of blue-green algae.

Classified as Cyanobacteria, blue-greens are a group of photosynthetic bacteria which are buoyant and will float on the surface, where they form scum layers or floating mats. These blue-green algae blooms, commonly referred to as pond scum, also can stink to high heaven.

“Right now, a huge blue-green algae bloom is forming on Lake Mendota and complaints are pouring in about a massive, stinky algae bloom on Lake Wisconsin,” said **Susan Graham**, South Central Region water resources management specialist in Fitchburg.

An up-close photo of blue-green algae blooms on Lake Monona in Madison.
WDNR Photo

There’s really nothing that can be done once blue-green algae blooms form. Chemical treatments with an herbicide or algaecide aren’t effective and, in fact, often make the problem worse, said Graham.

“Chemicals may kill the algae, but any toxin in the cells will be released at once, resulting in a slug of toxin in the water. So while the bloom may no longer be visible, toxins may be present for some time following treatment.”

“It’s just best to stay out of a water body experiencing a bloom and wait for it to dissipate on its own,” Graham advised.

Other problems associated with blue-green algae blooms include discolored water; reduced light penetration that can adversely affect aquatic vegetation; and eventual decomposition of the algae, which often leads to oxygen depletion and suffocation of fish.

Health experts advise a common sense approach when it comes to children and pets swimming in water bodies: if a scum layer or floating mat is present, don’t let your children or pets come in contact with the water or algae.